Document

Home Traditions and Practices Comparative Blog My Books Sitting Groups Artwork Contact Menu The Contemplative Life Exploring Contemplative Spirituality/Meditative Practice in the 21st Century Y.use('squarespace-ui-base', function(Y) { Y.one("h1.logo").plug(Y.Squarespace.TextShrink, { minFontSize: 18, parentEl: Y.one('#header') }); }); Home Traditions and Practices Comparative Blog My Books Sitting Groups Artwork Contact The Christian Contemplative Tradition Although one can find traces of certain forms of mysticism in the New Testament documents themselves, the Christian Contemplative Tradition is typically seen as having more substantial origins in the deserts of 3rd Century Egypt. As Christianity became the official religion of Rome, martyrdom, often thought to be the "most perfect way of following Christ," became a relic of the past. As an alternative to literally dying for the faith, hermits like St. Anthony the Great (usually seen as the "first Christian monk") entered the desert to live lives of radical simplicity and seek God in nearly complete solitude. Desert spirituality was characterized less by official meditative practice and more by a way of life – asceticism, internal (sometimes referred to as hesychast) and external silence, solitude, unceasing prayer, battling temptation, and seeking absolute obedience to one's conscience before God. Many of the Apophthegmata Patrum ("Sayings of the Desert Fathers") seem harsh in retrospect, even to those of later developed Christian monasticism, but these original Christian monks were performing the first experiments in monastic and solitary life within their tradition. Many of their excesses, especially in regards to severe asceticism, would be moderated as the tradition developed. A desert monk's home was his cell:"A brother came to Scetis to visit Abba Moses and asked him for a word. The old man said to him, 'Go, sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you all things.'"It was these desert cells – the original Christian solitary and small monastic

communities – from which more fully formed Christian monasticism would develop. As the centuries progressed, Christian monasticism gradually became more structured. Various forms of community and “Rules” were developed, with one form eventually achieving overwhelming prominence – that of the Rule of St. Benedict. Very little is known about Benedict of Nursia, our only account of his life coming from St. Gregory the Great (Pope 590-604). From this source we gather that Benedict lived in sixth-Century Italy, became a renowned holy man, and eventually established a large group of monastic communities. His Rule describes an orderly way of life – a “school for the Lord’s service” – the community being led by an Abbot, who stands in the place of Christ as overseer of souls. The Rule is practical, describing how to welcome visitors, hours of spiritual practice, performance of manual labor, and discipline for wayward monks. While specific enough to establish an actual community, the Rule is also general enough to be adapted as various monastic communities would develop in different contexts. The Rule of St. Benedict is still used widely today as a source for the development of monastic communities, especially in the Christian West. From its beginnings in Italy, Benedictine monasticism spread and flourished throughout Western Europe into, and through, the Middle Ages. During this time, other monastic, or quasi-monastic, orders developed within Catholicism, including the Cistercians, Trappists, Carthusians, Carmelites, Franciscans, and Dominicans among others. Admission into these religious orders typically included (and still includes) taking permanent vows (usually “poverty, chastity, and obedience”). These orders each have a distinct flavor or focus, and often draw from the Benedictine tradition to varying degrees. The core communal spiritual practice of the Rule of St. Benedict is Psalmody – singing, chanting, or praying the Psalms. In the Rule, Psalmody was to be practiced eight times a day. This daily structure of spiritual practice is sometimes called the Divine Office or the Liturgy of the Hours. As the tradition in the West continued to develop, other spiritual practices such as Lectio Divina, and

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Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky until his death in 1968, and was well-known for engaging with contemplatives from other world religious traditions including Zen Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, Taoism, and Sufism. Merton wrote over 50 books during his time as a monk including New Seeds of Contemplation, The Inner Experience, Zen and the Birds of Appetite, and Contemplative Prayer. His Journals were also published after his death. Richard Rohr is also of particular note as his writings are widely distributed in the United States. Rohr runs the Center for Action and Contemplation in New Mexico. The most widely-known modern attempt to summarize the Christian Contemplative Tradition in the form of a daily practice for laypersons is represented by the Centering Prayer movement associated with Thomas Keating, which draws heavily from The Cloud of Unknowing. For more on The Work of Contemplation/Centering Prayer, click here. The Christian Contemplative Tradition The Christian Contemplative Tradition The Christian Contemplative Tradition The Christian Contemplative Tradition Although one can find traces of certain forms of mysticism in the New Testament documents themselves, the Christian Contemplative Tradition is typically seen as having more substantial origins in the deserts of 3rd Century Egypt. As Christianity became the official religion of Rome, martyrdom, often thought to be the “most perfect way of following Christ,” became a relic of the past. As an alternative to literally dying for the faith, hermits like St. Anthony the Great (usually seen as the “first Christian monk”) entered the desert to live lives of radical simplicity and seek God in nearly complete solitude. Desert spirituality was characterized less by official meditative practice and more by a way of life – asceticism, internal (sometimes referred to as hesychast) and external silence, solitude, unceasing prayer, battling temptation, and seeking absolute obedience to one’s conscience before God. Many of the Apophthegmata Patrum (“Sayings of the Desert Fathers”) seem harsh in retrospect, even to those of later developed Christian monasticism, but these original Christian

monks were performing the first experiments in monastic and solitary life within their tradition. Many of their excesses, especially in regards to severe asceticism, would be moderated as the tradition developed. A desert monk's home was his cell:"A brother came to Scetis to visit Abba Moses and asked him for a word. The old man said to him, 'Go, sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you all things.'"It was these desert cells – the original Christian solitary and small monastic communities – from which more fully formed Christian monasticism would develop. Although one can find traces of certain forms of mysticism in the New Testament documents themselves, the Christian Contemplative Tradition is typically seen as having more substantial origins in the deserts of 3rd Century Egypt. As Christianity became the official religion of Rome, martyrdom, often thought to be the "most perfect way of following Christ," became a relic of the past. As an alternative to literally dying for the faith, hermits like St. Anthony the Great (usually seen as the "first Christian monk") entered the desert to live lives of radical simplicity and seek God in nearly complete solitude. Desert spirituality was characterized less by official meditative practice and more by a way of life – asceticism, internal (sometimes referred to as hesychast) and external silence, solitude, unceasing prayer, battling temptation, and seeking absolute obedience to one's conscience before God. Many of the Apophthegmata Patrum ("Sayings of the Desert Fathers") seem harsh in retrospect, even to those of later developed Christian monasticism, but these original Christian monks were performing the first experiments in monastic and solitary life within their tradition. Many of their excesses, especially in regards to severe asceticism, would be moderated as the tradition developed. A desert monk's home was his cell:"A brother came to Scetis to visit Abba Moses and asked him for a word. The old man said to him, 'Go, sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you all things.'"It was these desert cells – the original Christian solitary and small monastic communities – from which more fully formed Christian monasticism would develop. Although one can find traces of certain forms of mysticism in the

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prominent sourcebook for Eastern Orthodox Monastic practice is The Philokalia (“love of the beautiful”) which is a collection of writings from Christian monastics and solitaries dating back to the Desert Fathers. Other forms of Eastern Orthodox monasticism exist, but the largest community remains on Mount Athos. The final major branch of Christianity, Protestantism, is not unified structurally and thus does not have a true monastic tradition. One form of modern Protestantism which emphasizes spiritual experience above and beyond the interpretation of biblical texts is the Quaker tradition. A typical Quaker service simply consists of an hour (or more) of silence. Quakers have developed their own language around their experiences, especially regarding the “Inner Light.” Quakers range theologically from conservative to liberal, with many claiming no allegiance to traditional Christian doctrine at all. Centered on Mount Athos in Greece, Eastern Orthodox Monasticism is known for emphasizing Hesychasm – outer, and especially inner, stillness (parallels can possibly be drawn here to Western mystics’ descriptions of “contemplation” above) – as well as the practice of the Jesus Prayer, during which a monk silently repeats the phrase “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” The Jesus Prayer can be thought of as a way of maintaining recollection, or the awareness of and submission to God’s presence at all times. The Eastern Orthodox tradition is also well known for interpreting the doctrine of salvation in terms of Theosis, or deification. In this interpretation, spiritual practice is designed to lead the soul towards “becoming like,” or even “becoming,” God. Salvation, on this view, is spiritual transformation, in contrast to the Christian West’s more legal/transactional view of the doctrine. The most prominent sourcebook for Eastern Orthodox Monastic practice is The Philokalia (“love of the beautiful”) which is a collection of writings from Christian monastics and solitaries dating back to the Desert Fathers. Other forms of Eastern Orthodox monasticism exist, but the largest community remains on Mount Athos. The final major branch of Christianity, Protestantism, is not unified structurally and thus does not

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Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky until his death in 1968, and was well-known for engaging with contemplatives from other world religious traditions including Zen Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, Taoism, and Sufism. Merton wrote over 50 books during his time as a monk including New Seeds of Contemplation, The Inner Experience, Zen and the Birds of Appetite, and Contemplative Prayer. His Journals were also published after his death. Richard Rohr is also of particular note as his writings are widely distributed in the United States. Rohr runs the Center for Action and Contemplation in New Mexico. The most widely-known modern attempt to summarize the Christian Contemplative Tradition in the form of a daily practice for laypersons is represented by the Centering Prayer movement associated with Thomas Keating, which draws heavily from The Cloud of Unknowing. For more on The Work of Contemplation/Centering Prayer, click here. Modern voices from the Christian Contemplative Tradition broadly include Thomas Merton, Basil Pennington, Cynthia Bourgeault, Thomas Keating, David Frenette, Parker Palmer, Andrew Louth, and Richard Rohr. Thomas Merton was perhaps the last American contemplative “celebrity.” Merton was a member of the Trappist monastery Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky until his death in 1968, and was well-known for engaging with contemplatives from other world religious traditions including Zen Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, Taoism, and Sufism. Merton wrote over 50 books during his time as a monk including New Seeds of Contemplation, The Inner Experience, Zen and the Birds of Appetite, and Contemplative Prayer. His Journals were also published after his death. Richard Rohr is also of particular note as his writings are widely distributed in the United States. Rohr runs the Center for Action and Contemplation in New Mexico. The most widely-known modern attempt to summarize the Christian Contemplative Tradition in the form of a daily practice for laypersons is represented by the Centering Prayer movement associated with Thomas Keating, which draws heavily from The Cloud of Unknowing. For more on

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